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# THE WALLENBERG MYSTERY

by Kati Marton

A well-born Swede, who could have lived out World War II in safety and comfort, went to Hungary instead, outmaneuvered the despicable Adolf Eichmann, and saved the lives of tens of thousands of Jews. Then, one day in January 1945, Raoul Wallenberg was taken into custody by the Soviet Army and has not been heard from since. He may have been executed by the Soviets, or died in prison—or he may still be alive somewhere in the Soviet Union. The Wallenberg mystery persists.

It is one of those gun-gray structures of no particular architectural distinction, intended to provide housing, not to offer beauty. Like many other buildings in Budapest, it is still pockmarked by the small-arms fire of both 1945 and 1956. A faded, chipped plaque in Hungarian reads: "To the memory of Raoul Wallenberg, Swedish diplomat, whose heroic deeds saved tens of thousands of Hungarians from the final days of Nazi terror. Raoul Wallenberg disappeared during the siege of Budapest." In central Budapest, Wallenberg Street is several blocks from what Hungarians call the White House, the headquarters of

the Communist party, overlooking the Danube's east bank. The fact that a busy street in the capital of this people's republic is named after a man who may still be languishing in a Soviet prison is only one of the mystifying elements of the Raoul Wallenberg story.

For Wallenberg is a non-person in the country where his heroic deeds took place. When asked about him, most Hungarians shrug and keep walking. Those few who remember prefer not to be reminded. Yet today, in his native Sweden, Wallenberg is a folk hero. His name is synonymous with heroism and selflessness unrewarded. Perhaps in only one other part of the world is he as well known: the Gulag Archipelago.

He was a hero. That has been documented. But thirty-five years after the Russians took him prisoner he is above all the central figure of a mystery only his captors can unlock. So far, Moscow has shown no inclination to solve the enigma of Wallenberg. Pressure on the Soviets to do so is growing. But it was not always there. In the crucial early years after he vanished in Budapest, his own country's record on his behalf is one of blunders and missed opportunities.

The central drama in the life of Raoul Wallenberg lasted six months: from the summer of 1944 to the winter of 1945. It took place in Budapest, a city once as cosmopolitan and sophisticated as Wallenberg's native Stockholm. But the Budapest Raoul Wallenberg found in July 1944 could have been on another planet, in another millennium compared to the town he left

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behind in Sweden. It was a city stripped bare of all traces of what we like to refer to as civilization. The people of Budapest lived in the grip of fear, backed against a wall of terror, with no place to go and no friends to turn to. The heroes, if there were any heroes left in those months, either waited in their underground refuges for the jackboots to pass, or had long since taken the final journey to Dachau, Mauthausen, or Auschwitz. Courage, in Budapest, in the summer of 1944, was a crime punishable by death. It was an unlikely destination for the son of an illustrious Swedish dynasty.

**R**aoul Wallenberg's story begins in an atmosphere of unselfconscious gentility, of refinement polished by generations of distinguished public service and genuine accomplishment. He grew up amid the solid comforts of long accumulated wealth. The son of a naval officer, the grandson of Stockholm's minister to Tokyo and Istanbul, Wallenberg was expected both to serve and to excel. No one anticipated that his reward for service was to be decades spent languishing in the grim monotony of the Gulag.

By the summer of 1944, in all of Nazi-occupied Europe, only the Jews of Budapest had escaped annihilation. Hitler's last and most reluctant ally in the war, Hungary had tried repeatedly and unsuccessfully to shake off the Nazis' grip, tried to let the enemy powers, the Russians, the British, and the Americans, deal with her as mercifully as they chose. Anything was better than being Hitler's last friend in Europe. But the Nazis would not let go. And as the Third Reich's fall grew more inevitable each day, as the Russians pressed harder at its heels, the Nazis' reign of terror accelerated in Hungary. It was as though violence against a people still under their total command was the Nazis' final resource in the face of now certain defeat.

Until the spring of 1944, Hungarians, Jews and Christians alike, had lived with the illusion that the war would be over before Hitler's cattle cars swallowed entire villages, only to empty their human cargo before the crematoria that dotted the Reich's landscape. Projects of such scale take time, and weren't the Germans on the run, routed since Stalingrad? By now, however, the Nazis were highly practiced in the technology of genocide. It took them weeks to accomplish what it had taken them months and even years to achieve in the other occupied lands of Europe.

In Hungary rural Jews were the first to go. Between

May and July of 1944, half a million were herded to Auschwitz to die. By July the countryside was pronounced "purified." In many ways the unprecedented speed with which the Hungarian "Jewish question" was resolved can be attributed to one man: Adolf Eichmann. The story of Raoul Wallenberg in Budapest is really the story of a race between the giver of life and the instrument of death: Wallenberg versus Eichmann.

He did not look like a hero, this controlled, thirty-two-year-old man with his overly prominent nose and weak chin. His hair was already thinning. Wallenberg had no interest in clothes, but wore a well-knotted tie and vest even at the end, when he was a hunted man, changing residences each night. He looked too soft, too cerebral, to be a Scarlet Pimpernel. Only his eyes gave him away. In that unassuming, almost bland face, the eyes were a surprise. They were very steady, never the first to turn away from those he faced. In the eyes was all the passion everything else in his appearance belied. He looked perfectly suited for his chosen field: architecture. At the University of Michigan he showed more than the usual flair for his intended profession. But wartime, even for a neutral country, is not an auspicious moment for a young architect to begin. Finding a job was not the problem. Wallenberg joined one of his grandfather's banks.

The young Swede had already shown a remarkable facility for languages. Before long he was dispatched on business to Palestine. There, in the Mediterranean seaport of Haifa, he first heard reports of Nazi atrocities. Haifa was then teeming with Jewish refugees. The impression their accounts of Nazi Germany made on the young man was to be significant.

From then on, events in Raoul Wallenberg's life took an almost fatalistic turn. When he returned to Stockholm, he became the head of an export-import firm. Among his partners in the business was a Hungarian Jew named Kalman Lauer. Wallenberg found in Lauer a bright, sensitive, and cultivated companion, who soon became his closest friend. Lauer could no longer travel to his native country, so Raoul went in his place when business required it.

Budapest in those days was living out its own fantasy. Though part of the Axis, the charms of the city seemed to divert the Reich's soldiers so much that its residents could not imagine they would bring the war to its gates. So they continued to dine outdoors at Gundel's in the City Park, and to fill the dancing bars on Margit Island. They lined up to see Charlie Chaplin's bald-faced impersonation of Hitler in *The Great Dictator*, and they laughed uproariously. Black was the color in fashion, and "Stormy Weather" was the tune they hummed along the Corso by the Danube. Budapest's favorite riddle was, "What is the difference

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## The Wallenberg Mystery

between Hitler and Chamberlain? Chamberlain takes his weekend in the country, while Hitler takes his country on the weekend." This was the Budapest Raoul Wallenberg first saw in 1943: a city whose handsome baroque architecture proclaimed its ties to its sibling on the Danube, Vienna; a city whose people wanted desperately to hang on to their fantasy. Wallenberg was struck by the fragile quality of all this good living.

By then Raoul was learning the more precise details of what lay ahead for Hungary. His uncle, Jacob Wallenberg, had become an intermediary for the head of the German anti-Nazi underground, Karl Goerdeler. The elder Wallenberg tried to act as a liaison between Goerdeler, the mayor of Leipzig, and the British government. About the same time, when the fortunes of the German Army were rapidly declining, and the front was crumbling, Heinrich Himmler turned to Raoul's uncle with a peace feeler for the Allies. Like countless other efforts at the eleventh hour, these attempts led nowhere. Impatient now, young Wallenberg was convinced by these failures that he must get personally involved. He was not especially fearless by nature. Nor was he lusting for adventure. He had a consuming sense of duty and by 1944 he was ready to do more.

The awakening of Wallenberg's conscience coincided with a search by the World Jewish Council and the American ambassador in Stockholm for a Swede to undertake a rescue mission to Budapest. Ambassador Herschel Johnson, acting for FDR's War Refugee Board, was looking for someone who, under diplomatic cover, could move swiftly, cut through the requirements of red tape and protocol, and extricate as many Hungarian Jews from Hitler's grasp as he could. Money was not a problem. FDR had made a commitment to funnel whatever funds the rescue mission required through the American Embassy in Stockholm to Wallenberg. Before he accepted the Budapest mission, Wallenberg negotiated for three days with the Swedish Foreign Ministry. He insisted on having a free hand in Hungary, without strings, without regard for diplomatic niceties. The ministry gave him *carte blanche*.

When Eichmann first saw Wallenberg sitting at the bar of Budapest's Arizona nightclub, the SS captain took him for a decadent diplomat. Eichmann was wrong. Wallenberg was capable of beating the Nazis at their own game. He bribed, flattered, forged, and smuggled; he learned to survive in a state of total anarchy and terror. In the end, when the Nazis were on the run, when Eichmann was looking for a hiding place in Austria, Wallenberg was still hauling Jews out of the grip of the petty thugs who

stayed on because they had no place to run to, the Hungarian Nazis, known as the Arrow Cross.

In one of his final letters to his mother in Stockholm, Wallenberg wrote, "Among my personnel there are forty cases of disappearance and torture . . . I have a feeling after the arrival of the Russians it may be difficult for me to return to Stockholm for a while. I don't envision coming home before Easter . . . and even that is up in the air. No one can predict what will happen here."

The nightmare Wallenberg had lived through, the midnight raids by uniformed bandits on the helpless, the naked bodies lined up on the edge of a frozen Danube for "swimming lessons" by the Arrow Cross, represented a complete breakdown of order. The Danube was never blue, and very often red that winter of 1944-1945. The dead were no longer buried. Sirens no longer bothered to warn the residents of air raids that never ceased. When one of the Nazis' 30,000 horses was hit by a mortar shell, it took a group of starving men and women working with their pocketknives and fingernails only minutes to clean its carcass.

As a final gesture, the Arrow Cross, with the help of the remaining German soldiers, planned to massacre the 70,000 Jews huddled in the city's walled-in ghetto. One of Wallenberg's paid informers alerted him the night before the pogrom was to take place. A lone figure in the curfew-covered city, Wallenberg made his way to the German High Command, housed in the Royal Palace of Buda. Using his by now familiar threat, Wallenberg warned General August Schmidhuber he would personally see to it that the German would be tried as a war criminal if the massacre was not stopped. With the Allies' bombs raining overhead, Schmidhuber countermanded the order. In a single evening Wallenberg had saved 70,000 lives.

It was among Wallenberg's most successful tactics, this threat of repercussions. It would never have worked in Warsaw in 1941, when Hitler's vision of world domination still seemed a realizable nightmare. In Budapest, by 1944, the vision had crumbled for all but the most fanatic, as the Russians closed in on the once invincible Army of the Reich. Wallenberg exploited this fear of the future to the fullest. "He was a great actor," says his half-sister Nina Lagergren. "He could imitate brilliantly. If he wanted to, he could be more German than a Prussian general. Shouting louder, sounding more authoritative . . ." Thus, to an almost unbelievable degree, he was able to win concessions from the Nazis.

In January, when the Red Army had already penetrated Pest, on the eastern bank of the Danube, Wallenberg did not want to leave the city, or to follow his fellow diplomats to shelter in the safer hills of Buda. He was a driven man, unable to let go of what had

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become an obsession. "He was like a violinist, playing an extremely difficult concerto," says Edith Wohlerster, one of the thousands of Jews Wallenberg sheltered in Budapest, now first violinist of the Stockholm Opera. "It took everything out of him. But he did not want to stop." He had saved the remnants of the city's Jewish community. As many as 100,000 people were alive in large measure because of his ability to stand up to and outwit the Nazis. Now he wanted to do more for them.

"He was a great embarrassment to the Swedish Foreign Office," according to Carl-Frederik Palmstierna, former secretary to Swedish King Gustav Adolf. "After all, he was an amateur, not a professional diplomat. What he did in Budapest far exceeded anybody's expectations of what a rescue mission should be." By January 1945, the mission entrusted him by the War Refugee Board was over. But his personal mission, he felt, was simply entering a new phase. With his grand scheme, entitled the Wallenberg Institution for Rescue and Reconstruction, he intended to make his way to the only source of power left in this phantom country: the Soviet Army High Command in Debrecen, 200 kilometers east of Budapest. It was in some ways an arrogant plan. Marshal Rodion Malinovsky's troops were still fighting house to house in the capital. The last vestige of the German Army was still holed up in the Royal Palace. The Führer's order was that Budapest must be held as though it were Berlin. And Wallenberg wanted to sit down with the Soviet commander and discuss the future of the thousands of lost, unaccounted for, and orphaned whose sole hope he had become. He wanted to talk to the Communist Army of Occupation about restoring the property of Hungary's Jews.

On January 13, 1945, Wallenberg presented himself to a Soviet street patrol, near one of the thirty-two buildings he had set up as "safe houses," flying the flag of Sweden in Budapest. The end of the war was a hairbreadth away. Hitler had already locked himself in the Reich Chancellery bunker. In three weeks Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt would sit down in Yalta and redraw the map of Europe. In two days, the evacuation of Auschwitz was to begin. For most people the long nightmare was ending. For Raoul Wallenberg, it was about to begin.

Four days later, on January 17, Wallenberg, flanked by a Soviet motorcycle escort, began the journey he thought would take him to Debrecen. He had no way of knowing that the red epaulet decorating the uniform of the major who accompanied him stood for the NKVD, the Soviet State Security Service, the predecessor of the KGB. Wallenberg was permitted to make several stops on the way out of Budapest. For Jews in several Swedish houses he distributed large amounts of



money he always carried. At his final stop, the improvised hospital set up by the Swedish Red Cross, Wallenberg slipped on the icy sidewalk of the entrance. As he was helped to his feet by one of the hospital staff, Paul Nevi, Wallenberg caught a glimpse of three elderly patients with yellow stars still stitched to their coats, carefully making their way to the hospital. "I am happy to see," Wallenberg remarked to his companion, "my mission has not been completely in vain." Those were among his final words as a free man. He had outsmarted, outrun, and outlived the Nazis. Eichmann, who tried unsuccessfully to have him killed, had paid him a great compliment. He called Wallenberg "a brilliant chess player." But the Swede had no experience in dealing with the new occupiers of Hungary. He knew nothing of survival under a system of institutionalized indifference and distrust.

The Russians were resentful and suspicious of the residents of Budapest, Hitler's last allies. Scenes of Soviet troops looting and raping in broad daylight were commonplace. The sex- and alcohol-starved "liberators" replaced one form of terror with another. The steady rumble of tank fire shook the capital. The waters of the Danube reflected the flames of burning buildings. Already, long lines of prisoners were twisting eastward.

Wallenberg assumed he would be the honored guest of Marshal Malinovsky. Were they not, after all, natural allies, with a shared record of fighting a common

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## The Wallenberg Mystery

*Executioner Adolf Eichmann (far left), his nemesis, Raoul Wallenberg, and (below) Budapest Jews being herded off to Nazi death camps, as photographed from Wallenberg's automobile.*



enemy? His connection to Washington through the War Refugee Board was no secret. Wallenberg had no way of knowing that the end of World War II would signal the beginning of another confrontation: the Cold War.

Rumors of the incredible concessions he had wrung from the Nazis, the tens of thousands of lives he had saved as a result, all this was fascinating raw material for the agents of the NKVD. The Soviet Security Police had by then set up its own separate chain of command, alongside the military. From subsequent testimony it is clear what they were after. All members of the Swedish legation were arrested in the weeks following Wallenberg's disappearance. Each diplomat was interrogated on the subject of Raoul's clandestine activities. Jewish leaders and Wallenberg's collaborators were always asked the same questions: "Did you collaborate, through Wallenberg, with the Nazis? If you admit it you can get off easy. If not . . ."

Meanwhile, Wallenberg and his Hungarian driver, Vilmos Langfelder, were on a train, bound not for Debrecen but crossing Rumania, bound for Moscow. Before they were led to the Lubyanka, they were shown the famous subway of the Soviet capital. By January 31, Wallenberg occupied cell 123 of the former Moscow Hotel, transformed into a vaultlike fortress for political prisoners. His cellmate during those early weeks was Gustav Richter, a former German police officer, arrested in Bucharest. Richter, released in 1955, has testified that all prisoners who had shared a cell with either Wallenberg or his driver were first

interrogated about them, then put in solitary confinement.

It was not until the spring of 1945 that the other members of the Swedish legation in Budapest were able to start their slow journey home to Stockholm. The diplomats had been held at an internment camp outside Budapest. Ironically, at first the Swedish government was more concerned about the rest of the embassy staff than about Wallenberg. In February, they had word from the Soviet ambassador to Stockholm that Raoul was in protective custody and in good health in Moscow. Stockholm had no word regarding its other diplomats in Hungary for several months.

In April the group turned up in Moscow on its way to Stockholm. The diplomats were received by the Swedish ambassador to the Kremlin, Stefan Söderblom. It was Söderblom's task to get some answers about Wallenberg's whereabouts out of the Soviets. It was a mission the ambassador was singularly unenthusiastic about fulfilling. Söderblom was far more interested in building good relations with the Kremlin than in making a fuss over the disappearance of a single Swedish diplomat. According to the editor of *Expressen*, Sweden's most widely read newspaper, Söderblom suffered from "*rysskrack*," fear of Russia. It is not an uncommon emotion in a country where little children are still admonished to behave or "the Russians will get you!" In postwar Sweden, "*rysskrack*" was often combined with a sense of guilt for having preserved the country's neutrality during the war. Sweden's eastern neighbor had lost 20 million of her people. Raoul Wallenberg fell victim to both the deep-rooted fear and the guilt his countrymen felt vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.

One of Raoul's fellow Swedes in Budapest, Per Anger, recalls Ambassador Söderblom pulling Anger aside as the diplomatic party was about to leave Moscow for Stockholm. "Remember," Söderblom whispered to Anger, "when you get to Sweden, not one bad word about the Russians." Anger, recently retired as Sweden's ambassador to Ottawa, was by then convinced Wallenberg had been taken prisoner by the Soviets under suspicion of spying. "I met with very little understanding of this theory in the Foreign Office," Anger writes in his memoirs. "I had the feeling nobody at home who had not been abroad during the War understood what I was talking about." The following year, 1946, Sweden granted the Soviet Union one billion kroner in trade credit. The Swedes asked for nothing in return.

On several occasions, under pressure from Wallenberg's family, the Foreign Office had to prod Söderblom to continue to raise the subject of Wallenberg with the Soviets. When the ambassador finally succeeded in gaining an audience with Stalin, the Swede provided the Soviet leader with the easiest way out of a

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## The Wallenberg Mystery

of medicine, Dr. Nanna Svartz, brought up the subject of Raoul Wallenberg in conversation with one of her Soviet colleagues, Dr. A. L. Myasnikov, during an international scientific congress. To her surprise, the Russian told Dr. Svartz he knew of Wallenberg and had heard he was in a mental institution in rather poor condition. The conversation, as all previous exchanges between the two scientists, was in German. Myasnikov was subsequently called before Party Chairman Nikita Khrushchev, and later recanted his story. It was his poor German that was the source of the misunderstanding, he explained. Myasnikov died of a heart attack not long after this episode. But now, the Swedish journalist who has been more dogged in his pursuit of the Wallenberg trail than any other, Eric Sjöquist, claims that is not where the Nanna Svartz connection ends. Sjöquist interviewed the ninety-year-old professor recently, and asked for the full story. Dr. Svartz told him Myasnikov not only knew of the Wallenberg case, but had personally examined Raoul inside a Soviet mental institution in 1961. The Svartz-Myasnikov chapter is part of the still classified section of the Swedish file on Wallenberg. Under Swedish law it will not be opened until 1981.

In 1973 Raoul's eighty-year-old mother, Maj von Dardel, wrote a letter to a man she thought would be a natural ally in her quest to determine her son's fate: Henry Kissinger. The State Department drafted a letter to Raoul's mother, promising help through inquiries to be made by the American Embassy in Moscow. The letter gave as reason for this offer "the efforts on behalf of Hungarian Jews during World War II," undertaken by Wallenberg at the behest of the United States. But the letter was never sent. Kissinger, then national security adviser, disapproved it. When the head of the American Wallenberg Committee, Lena Björck-Kaplan, asked the former secretary of state for an explanation, Kissinger replied that others on his staff were empowered to use his signature. He said he never knew the letter had been disapproved.

In 1979 the long dormant case was forced open again. This time a Tel Aviv dentist was the unlikely connection. Dr. Anna Bilder had never heard of Raoul Wallenberg until she received a telephone call from her father, a Moscow Jew recently released from a Soviet prison camp. Jan Kaplan, a former administrator of an operatic conservatory in Moscow, was jailed in 1975 on charges of black marketeering, following his request for an exit visa to Israel. He was freed eighteen months later for health reasons. Kaplan told his daughter it is possible to survive life in the Gulag. "In fact," Kaplan went on, "I met a Swede in the Butyrki prison in Moscow who has

survived thirty years." For nearly two years Anna Bilder had no further word from her father. Then, in July 1979, Anna's mother smuggled a letter to her daughter in Israel. "My dear Anna," Mrs. Kaplan wrote, "the same thing has happened again to your father. For the past year and a half he has been imprisoned. . . . I had lost all hope after having been summoned to the Lubyanka by the KGB, where I was told all this happened because of a letter concerning a Swiss or a Swede named Wallenberg whom your father knew in the prison infirmary. Your father had written to you about this Wallenberg and tried to get it to you through some tourists he met in the synagogue. Since then, your father has been in Lefortovo and in the Lubyanka and I have now lost all hope of ever seeing him again."

The letter resulted in an official request from the Swedish Foreign Ministry to interview Jan Kaplan, wherever he may be. It was the first official Swedish communication on the subject of Raoul Wallenberg in fourteen years. It has thus far elicited the same response as most other efforts on his behalf: silence.

The Swedes no longer consider the Wallenberg case a bilateral issue between themselves and the Soviets. In 1945 Ambassador Söderblom rejected an offer of help in negotiating Raoul's release by Averell Harriman. In 1979 Secretary of State Cyrus Vance met with Raoul's half sister and assured her of Washington's interest.

Last fall, breaking its former practice of not proposing prisoner exchanges because "Sweden does not do such things," Stockholm offered Moscow a deal. Stig Bergling, former Swedish Defense Ministry employee and recently convicted KGB agent, now serving a life sentence in Sweden, was proposed as an exchange for Raoul Wallenberg. Bergling's arrest and trial in November 1979 was the biggest spy scandal in recent Swedish history. The Swede was picked up by Israeli intelligence officers in Tel Aviv. Using sophisticated radio communications, Bergling had for years been passing high-level Swedish military secrets to the Soviets. Most recently, as a member of the Swedish UN battalion in the Gaza and southern Lebanon, he had maintained regular contact with the KGB. He was, as the Swedish Foreign Ministry put it, "a blown agent," of no further use to the Soviets. The Kremlin showed no interest in exchanging Bergling for Wallenberg.

There is no doubt the riddle of Raoul Wallenberg has cast a shadow over Swedish-Soviet relations. No Swedish administration can again neglect the case as it was neglected in 1945. Whatever hopes the Soviets may have nurtured of "Finlandizing" Sweden have been dashed; Raoul Wallenberg has now become a permanent symbol of the inhumanity and indifference of the Soviet system.

Inside Stockholm's baroque Foreign Ministry, offi-

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cials are not optimistic about ever learning more about Wallenberg. The prisoner, if he is alive, would now be sixty-eight years old, having spent thirty-five of those years in Soviet prisons. The Swedes feel it would take a major shift in the Kremlin leadership to be able to reverse the years of stubborn insistence that Wallenberg died of a heart attack in 1947. Above all it would require the fall from power of Andrei Gromyko, who, more than anyone else in the Kremlin, is personally identified with the Soviet line on Wallenberg, and the foreign minister is, by Soviet standards, a youthful seventy-one.

Almost as a sort of penance for the early years of excessive caution, the Swedish government must continue to pursue the trail of Raoul Wallenberg. But who can say for how long? His tracks keep reappearing. Last year a newly arrived young Soviet Jew turned up at the Swedish Embassy in Tel Aviv. He told the story of a party he had attended shortly before leaving Moscow. It was at the home of one of his close friends, whose father he knew to be a KGB agent. After a night of raucous drinking, his friend's father warned them, "Be careful, boys, or you will end up like this Swede I met in the Lubyanka. He's been sitting for thirty-five years." Swedish diplomatic sources claim the KGB agent has since been removed from his job.

The Swedish government says Wallenberg's current trail leads to the Mordvinia prison complex in the western Russian autonomous republic of Moldavia. In the past few months, prisoners coming out of this complex have reported sighting him there in a special prison for those inmates who are supposed to be officially dead. Neither the Swedes nor the Wallenberg Committee are willing to disclose the names of new witnesses. Too many others, like Jan Kaplan and perhaps the KGB agent, have been lost because of early disclosures.

For Raoul Wallenberg, it may be too late. His is the tragic story of a life of boundless promise cut short. But the almost obsessive search for the key to his mystery may well go on for years, perhaps decades, because it is a question that probes at the heart of a system once described by Churchill as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." Why did they take a man, so plainly innocent, and lock him up for life? What degree of paranoia would suspect Raoul Wallenberg, who had no need for money, and whose position in society was assured, of spying? And why, when Stalinists were purged from the Kremlin's ranks in 1957, did they not free him? Were they waiting for the Swedes to "put hard against hard," as diplomat Per Anger claims, to come up with a bargaining chip stronger than a simple appeal to decency? The world will probably never get solid answers to the nagging questions that have overgrown this case like weeds.

There have been too many contradictions, too much subterfuge surrounding Raoul Wallenberg, for the Soviets to start sounding credible about him now. Even if they did produce their Wallenberg file, perhaps as thick as the Swedes' own, would it be believed as the genuine article, or dismissed as fabrication?

Without a doubt the Soviets have been surprised by the fresh international concern about Wallenberg. The West's attention span is not generally known to be this durable. Wallenberg's mystery appears to fuel itself: in Stockholm, in Tel Aviv, and in New York, there is a growing body of folklore, rooted in fact, about Raoul Wallenberg. Stories are repeated now of Wallenberg driving alongside the so-called "death marchers," Hungarian Jews being led to the Austrian border and the death camps. He distributed food, warm clothes, and Swedish passports to the wretched marchers. Those he could Wallenberg pulled from the convoy into his car and drove back to Budapest. Risking his own, he was able to save dozens of lives this way. Or they tell of an unarmed Wallenberg sitting across the dinner table from a fully armed Eichmann. The Swede calmly lectured the Nazi on the inevitability of the Reich's demise. Eichmann, sipping Wallenberg's brandy, renewed his pledge to have him killed.

In 1780, a German Jew named Michael Bendicks traveled north to Stockholm, in search of opportunities denied him by Germany's anti-Semitic laws. Bendicks found that in Stockholm, too, Jews were barred from the professions. He became a jeweler. Bendicks was said to be a man of cultivation and curiosity. He prospered and ended up lending the king money. Bendicks, who married a Lutheran and was himself converted, would in all probability have approved of his great-great-grandson, Raoul Wallenberg.

"People often say I am indulging in wishful thinking," says Nina Lagergren, "imagining my brother is still alive. They are wrong. It is wishful thinking to imagine him dead. To believe he has been spared these years of being buried alive. That is wishful thinking."

On a Sunday in April 1948, a giant statue representing Saint George slaying the dragon, symbol of Raoul Wallenberg's fight against the Nazis, was to be unveiled in Budapest. It had been commissioned by the city's grateful residents and was to stand in Saint Stephen's Park, not far from the street which bears Wallenberg's name. But the people of the city were never to see the monument. Overnight, passersby reported seeing Russian soldiers, with ropes and horses, removing the statue. By morning, only its pedestal was still in place. Recently, the monument reappeared, without an inscription, in front of a penicillin factory in the eastern Hungarian city of Debrecen. Raoul Wallenberg's destination the day he disappeared thirty-five years ago. □

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